

Policy paths for increased green spaces in Chicago

INCREASED ACTION TO UNIFY A COMMUNITY

- **More green spaces are needed** to increase community unification and decrease crime rates.
- **Stronger policies at local levels** are needed to implement more green spaces and encourage community engagement.
- **Education** is needed to raise awareness of the benefits of green spaces for the environment and society
- **Public investment and stronger policy approaches** can promote a greater implementation of green spaces and their public programs.

What is the issue?

Chicago is known in the United States not only as a tourist attraction but also for having an unusually high violent crime rate. For every 100,000 people that reside in Chicago, approximately 904 violent crimes were reported to have been committed in the year 2016.

The largest factor that contributes to the violent crime rate is the poverty level and a lack of funding for social programs within the city. This can often lead to violent, gang-associated lifestyles within the community. It is theorized that racial tensions and segregations within certain parts of Chicago play a role in the increased violence as well (NPR 2016).

Why is this important?

The crime and violence in Chicago have caused citizens to be in desperate need of unification. Since the 1990's there has been a reduction in murder rates, however, the rates are still high compared to other large cities in the United States (City Data 2016). One factor responsible for the decreased violence is the establishment of crime-fighting units within the police departments. However, there are other factors responsible for the progress made in reducing violent crime rates.

Increasing the number of green spaces throughout the city, especially in areas with high crime rates, is a large factor as it reduces the violent crime rate within Chicago. Green spaces are areas of grass, trees, and other vegetation set apart for recreational or aesthetic purposes in an otherwise urban environment. It is well known that these areas have a substantial positive environmental impact on cities, as they improve air quality, lower temperatures, and protect water quality (Project Evergreen 2018).

Research has also shown that green spaces benefit the moods of citizens, lead to a reduction in crime, and unify their surrounding areas.

Researchers in the United Kingdom found that green spaces have a long-lasting, positive impact on mental well-being. Researcher Matthew White found that people who live in "greener" urban areas showed fewer signs of depression and anxiety. Three years later, the positive impact on citizens still remained with significantly better mental health. White's study also found "evidence that people within an area with green spaces are less stressed and when you are less stressed you make more sensible decisions and you communicate better" (Kinver 2014).

While there are many factors which lead to one's decision to commit a crime, stress can play a large role. Therefore, **increasing access to green spaces in Chicago has a large potential to lower crime rates and provide citizens with better mental health.**



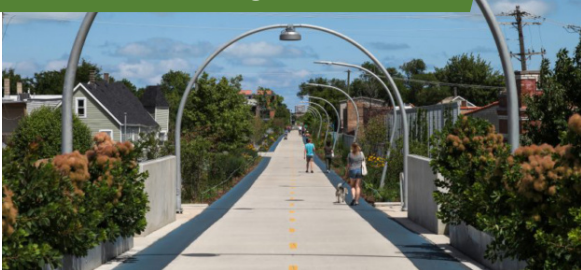
The Chicago Park District has implemented initiatives to promote inclusivity throughout the Park system (CPD 2018).

Green spaces work in Chicago

Chicago has created innovative environmental policies, which focus on sustainability now and in the future. The Chicago Park District is the largest municipal park manager in the United States owning more than 8,800 acres of green spaces (CPD 2018). The 2016 Strategic Plan Update by the Chicago Park District looked to improve green spaces within Chicago by “increasing the amount of natural area acreage and ecotourism opportunities, becoming a national model for sustainable urban natural areas, and ensuring all residents live within a 10 minute walk of a park or open space” (CPD 2016). The commitment to the environment and sustainability of the city, as well as to the quality of life and safety of citizens sets the Chicago Park District apart.

In 2015, Chicago created the Bloomingdale Trail a 2.7 mile elevated greenway. In 2017, researches studied crime statistics in Chicago neighborhoods from before and after the creation of the trail. They found that neighborhoods closest to the trail experienced a decrease in crime, most noticeable in the lower-income neighborhoods located toward the western part of the trail. One reason for the decrease in crime was the increased residential and commercial activity which led to more foot traffic. Researchers also found that “people along the trail may also be having more positive interactions and feeling a greater sense of community among neighborhoods, which prompts them to take ownership in the trail” (Hays 2017). The green spaces brought communities together and provided a place to socialize with neighbors they typically wouldn’t. The addition of green spaces in Chicago, will likely continue the decrease in crime rates and increase the unification of communities.

Bloomingdale Trail



Key challenges in Chicago’s green space policies

The Chicago Park District demonstrates that Chicago recognizes the environmental and societal impacts of green spaces. Chicago still needs a unification of their community and has an opportunity for environmental growth. However, there are challenges in developing and sustaining green spaces within Chicago. Challenges such as budget constraints, cost-benefit analysis, and public buy-in create difficulties when implementing green space policies. These challenges will require better education of benefits green spaces offer to the environment and the society. The Chicago Park District has worked to balance their expenses with revenues to avoid budget constraints preventing the expansion of green spaces within the city (CPD 2012). However, it remains essential to keep expenses low due to budget constraints.

What should policymakers do?

Chicago policymakers need to become educated on the key benefits of green spaces:

- Green spaces provide a less stressful environment which allows sensible decisions and communication. (Kinver 2014)
- Green spaces promote a greater sense of unification among the community (Hays 2017)
- Green spaces can lead to lower crime rates within communities (Hays 2017)

From a policy perspective, Chicago desperately needs a unification of their communities and green spaces offer an outlet for unification.

The Chicago Park District in their 2018 Strategic Plan Update should:

- Continue towards their goal of ensuring all residents live within a 10-minute walk of a park or open space.
- Continue to work to increase the natural area acreage across Chicago providing more green spaces to communities with high crime rates.
- Work to create programs for their green spaces that bring awareness to community diversity, as well as youth programs to create a safe location for children to spend free time outdoors.

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